



Throughout 2001, *The Dolphin* featured articles on the influence of African Americans in our maritime trades. The following is by LIMM's former director, Doug Shaw.

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# THE DOLPHIN

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## AFRICAN AMERICANS IN U.S. COAST GUARD HISTORY

By Douglas Shaw

*"I examined this man, and found him to be 38 years of age, strong, robust physique, intelligent and able to read and write. He is reputed one of the best surfmen on this coast of North Carolina."*

So wrote Charles F. Shoemaker, Assistant Inspector of the U.S. Lifesaving Service in his recommendation of Richard Etheridge to serve as keeper of the Pea Island Station on North Carolina's Outer Banks. Shoemaker explained, in his letter to Sumner I. Kimball, General Superintendent of the Service that "the efficiency of the service at the Pea Island station will be greatly enhanced by the appointment of Etheridge. It is not until much further on in his letter that Shoemaker makes reference to the unique nature of this appointment adding only that "no colored man holds the position of Keeper in the Lifesaving Service."

The history of the United States Coast Guard spans well over 200 years, encompassing the histories of the four federal agencies it subsumed: the Revenue Cutter Service (est. 1790), the United States Lifesaving Service (recognized in 1878), the U.S. Lighthouse Service (est. 1798) and the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection (est. 1838). The Coast Guard is an agency of the Federal department of Transportation, with an enormous resource of ships, aircraft, shore stations, schools and people.

In 1830, future President Abraham Lincoln was 21 years old. It was a full thirty-three years before he would issue his monumental Emancipation Proclamation, which effectively ended institutional slavery. With that proclamation, however, the role of African Americans in the Revenue Cutter Service was largely unchanged. As early as 1830 the Service had restricted the use of slave labor, but permitted the paid employment of African Americans.

The only African American to have a commission or command in any pre-Coast Guard Service was Captain Michael A. Healy. One of ten children of a slave and her master in Macon, Georgia, Healy was deemed "colored" by the "one-drop" law, which classified any person with any "colored" blood as "colored," and therefore unfree. Healy's father sent him north to school, but he soon found his calling on the sea. At age 15 Healy was hired as a cabin boy aboard the British clipper *Jumna* bound for Calcutta. He was accepted as the first African

American commissioned into the Revenue Cutter Service on March 4, 1865, and by July 1870 had been promoted to First Lieutenant.

Healy's career took him as far from his Macon, GA roots as one could imagine. He distinguished himself on several polar expeditions, first as a Lieutenant aboard the cutter *Rush*, later in 1877 as Commander aboard the Revenue Cutter *Chandler*, charged with the enforcement of sealing restrictions in the Bering Sea. He is the first African American to command a U.S. government vessel. In addition to his command, Healy served as deputy U.S. Marshall in Alaska for several years. Healy's reputation as a hard-nosed, very demanding Captain who tolerated nothing but the very best from his crew and punished them severely when they produced anything less earned him the nickname "Hell-Raising Healy." That, combined with a propensity for drinking later in his career landed him in two separate court martial trials.

For Healy's commitment to the Revenue Cutter Service and his service to the people of Alaska, the U.S. Coast Guard has named its newest polar-class icebreaker in his honor.

The early history of the United States Lighthouse Service is sketchy and full of apocryphal stories. The role, therefore of African-Americans in that story is even more difficult to establish. In 1718 the keeper of the Boston Light perished with his slave in a storm, and 1835 legislation prevented African-Americans from serving aboard lightships in any capacity apart from cooks.

The United States Lifesaving Service often relied on native populations to patrol coastlines. Experienced fishermen, regardless of race, living on the coast lines from Maine to North Carolina provided a steady labor force for the Service. Qualified men needed only medical clearance to be issued Articles of Engagement and become paid lifesavers. In December of 1876 10 Shinnecock Indians on Long Island's south shore died in a salvage operation of the *Circassian*. The nearby Tiana Station was staffed for many years from the late 19th to early 20th century by an all African American crew.

From the time of the appointment of Richard Etheridge as Keeper in 1880 until its closure in 1947, the crew at the Pea Island Station in North Carolina was all African-American. Despite



*Pea Island Coast Guard Station.*

significant local opposition to his appointment including a desertion by white surfmen who refused to serve under a black man's command and a mysterious fire which burned the original Pea Island Station to the ground, Superintendent Kimball stood by his appointment of Etheridge. In fear of stirring more controversy and hatred in the community, no investigation was ever made into the causes of the fire. Etheridge and his crew lived and worked from the station stable while the new station was being built. Notable among their many accomplishments was the safe rescue of the entire crew of the *E.S. Newman* in October of 1896. Unable to reach the stranded ship by surfboat, Etheridge ordered two of his crewmen into the water, led by surfman Meekins, with ropes tied around their bodies. They were to swim the line out to the distressed vessel and begin the rescue. After six hours all hands, including the Captain, his wife and their three year old son were safely rescued.

The Pea Island crew quickly developed a reputation for bravery and commitment to duty, even in the most perilous conditions. Despite the prevailing attitudes towards African-Americans at the time, they were considered among the best, if not the best lifesaving crew in the service.

On February 29, 1992 the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Pea Island* was commissioned at Norfolk, Virginia in memory of the all African-American crews at the Pea Island Station, including Richard Etheridge.

Despite the service and heroism of African-Americans in its predecessor agencies, it was April 1942, with the nation on the brink of war when President Franklin D. Roosevelt made clear that African-Americans would be fully integrated into the Coast Guard. African-American sailors would now be accepted into service in positions other than messmen. That spring one hundred and fifty volunteer recruits arrived at the Manhattan Beach Training Station in New York. Those who qualified after four weeks' basic training went on to become radio operators, pharmacists, electricians and coxswains. Though training was fully integrated, mess and bunk facilities remained segregated. In 1944 Ensign Harvey Russell becomes the first African-American graduate of the Coast Guard's Officer Candidate School, and in 1966 Merle Smith is the first African-American graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London.

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#### NOTES ON AFRICAN AMERICANS IN U.S. COAST GUARD HISTORY

The United States Coast Guard today is a fully integrated agency, with men and women of all races serving at every level. Of the class of 2005 entering the Coast Guard Academy in September 2001, twenty-three percent are racial or ethnic minorities.

*"Richard Etheridge, Benjamin Bowser, Lewis Wescott, Dorman Pugh, Theodore Meekins, Stanley Wise, William Irving. I say these names out loud by way of atonement for the many years they have been lost to us."*

Kate Burkhart, age 14,  
March 5, 1996, Washington, D.C.

After extensive research, students from Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Massachusetts and one 14 year old from Washington DC discovered the same shocking fact. During their years of service and with many daring rescues during those years, 1880-1947, the Pea Island crew was never recognized for their bravery. They, along with CDR Steve Rochon, USCGR began a campaign for recognition of the Pea Island crew. Writing to members of Congress, the Coast Guard Commandant, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina and President Clinton, this unlikely lobbying team saw their efforts through to fruition when, on March 5, 1996 the Commandant unveiled the Gold Lifesaving Medal for the crew of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station at the Navy Memorial in Washington, D.C. Over thirty Pea Island descendants attended that event.

Commander Michael Healy made annual trips to King Island, Alaska. One year, he found the population reduced to 100 starving, desperate people. After ordering immediate food and clothing relief, Healy worked with Dr. Shedon Jackson from the Bureau of Education to import reindeer from Siberia. During the following ten years, Revenue Cutters brought over 1000 reindeer to Alaska. The Bureau of Education taught people how to raise and care for the animals and, by 1940, the reindeer population of Alaska had risen above 500,000.



*Captain Michael A. Healy, US Revenue Cutter Service.*